

For parents and carers
of children with autism



Simple conversations to keep your child safe from abuse



NSPCC

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Helping you find the right words

The NSPCC helps parents and carers talk to their children about staying safe. It's part of our work to prevent abuse from happening to any child. And it's what this guide is all about.

Conversations, like crossing the road safely, bullying and dealing with strangers, are subjects that you and your child might talk about. But what about staying safe from sexual abuse?

It's a conversation no parent wants to have, but thankfully it doesn't have to be scary. In fact, you don't even have to mention sexual abuse. Simple conversations really can help keep your child safe, and that's what – over the next few pages – we will help you do.





What is talking PANTS?

Talking PANTS is a simple way to help keep children safe from abuse. It teaches children that their body belongs to them, they have the right to say no, and that they should tell an adult if they're upset or worried about anything.

To help children remember how to keep themselves safe, we created some rules. Each letter of PANTS covers a different rule and communicates a simple but valuable lesson that can help keep a child safe.

How and when you talk PANTS to your child is your choice. After all, you know them better than anyone. You'll know when they're ready and how much detail you need to go into.

This guide has everything you need to get those conversations started. Plus, the centre spread of this booklet is designed to be pulled out for you to use with your child when the time is right.





You can help prevent abuse. Simple conversations really can keep children safe.

Tips and techniques

- Conversations about staying safe should not be a one-off. It's much better to have conversations little and often. This will help you to reinforce the key points, and to adapt the message as your child gets older.
- Once you're ready to talk, you might find your child isn't. That's OK. The most important thing is to not force the issue. The last thing you want is for your child to feel it's a big deal. Make sure you choose a time when your child is relaxed and there are no distractions. Consider the environment you are in (for example, sensory issues) to ensure your child will be able to take in the information.
- Weaving simple conversations about staying safe into the daily routine is a great way to stop it feeling like a lecture. If it feels less weird for your child, it will feel much easier for you too.
- You may need to back up conversations with visual supports to help your child's understanding. For tips visit autism.org.uk/visualsupports





Talking PANTS

PRIVATES ARE PRIVATE **N**O MEANS NO

Anything covered by underwear is private. No one should ask to see or touch parts of the body covered by underwear. No one should ask your child to touch or look at parts of their body covered by underwear. If anyone tries, your child should say no.

In some situations, people – such as family members at bathtime, doctors or nurses – may need to touch your child’s private parts. Explain to your child that this is OK, but that those people should always explain why, and ask first.

Your child has the right to say no – even to a family member or someone they love. This shows your child that they’re in control of their body and that their feelings are respected.

There are times when you may need to overrule your child’s preferences to keep them safe – like when you’re crossing the road – but it helps if you explain why. If a child feels empowered to say no to their own family, they are more likely to say no to others. Social stories could be used to explain consequences of unsafe actions. For advice visit autism.org.uk/socialstories

ALWAYS REMEMBER YOUR BODY BELONGS TO YOU

Your child should know their body belongs to them, and no one else. No one has the right to make your child do anything with their body that makes them feel uncomfortable. If anyone tries, they should tell a trusted adult. You may need to explain what feeling uncomfortable means, and help them identify trusted adults.





Your child should know their body belongs to them and no one else.

TALK ABOUT SECRETS THAT UPSET YOU

Help your child feel confident that speaking up about a secret that's worrying them won't get them into trouble. Explain the difference between 'good' and 'bad' secrets.

Some secrets, like surprise parties, can be good. But adults should never make a child keep a secret that makes them feel worried, sad or frightened. Secrets are often an abuser's greatest weapon. Phrases like "it's our little secret" are their way of making a child feel worried or scared to tell.

Help your child to feel clear and confident about what to share and when. Secrets shouldn't be kept in exchange for something, and should never make your child feel uneasy. A secret should always be shared in the end. Social stories may help to explain this.

SPEAK UP, SOMEONE CAN HELP

If your child feels sad, anxious or frightened they can talk to an adult they trust. They may initially need help identifying and naming these emotions. A trusted adult will listen, and can help stop whatever's making them upset. If they find it difficult to talk to someone about this, they could write down or draw what is worrying them. Remind your child that whatever the problem, it's not their fault and they won't get into trouble.

A trusted adult doesn't have to be a parent. It can be a teacher, an older brother or sister or a friend's parent. It can even be Childline or the autism helpline.

Our friendly dino, Pantosaurus, can help you with his song at [nspcc.org.uk/pants](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/pants)



TALK
PANTS
AND STAY SAFE



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LEARN THE PANTS RULES FOR STAYING SAFE



PRIVATES ARE PRIVATE

Parts of your body covered by underwear are private. No one should ask to see or touch them. No one should ask you to touch or look at parts of their body that are covered by underwear.

Sometimes doctors, nurses or family members might have to. But they should always explain why, and ask if it's OK first.



ALWAYS REMEMBER YOUR BODY BELONGS TO YOU

It's your body, no one else's. No one should make you do things that make you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. If anyone tries, tell an adult you trust.



NO MEANS NO

You have the right to say 'no' – even to a family member or someone you love. Remember, you're in control of your body and your feelings are important.



TALK ABOUT SECRETS THAT UPSET YOU

Secrets shouldn't make you feel upset or worried. If they do, tell an adult you trust. You will never get into trouble for sharing a secret that upsets you.



SPEAK UP, SOMEONE CAN HELP

Talk about stuff that makes you worried or upset. An adult you trust will listen, and be able to help. It doesn't have to be a family member. It can be a teacher or a friend's parent – you can also call Childline on **0800 1111** and someone will always be there to listen. If you find it difficult to talk about, you could write it down or draw a picture instead.





Your questions answered

Why is it important to talk PANTS?

We understand that conversations about abuse can be difficult for both parents and children. Parents don't want to scare or upset their children, and some feel it's too soon.

That's why we encourage parents and children to talk PANTS – simple conversations about staying safe.

Unfortunately, as stories in the media remind us, child sexual abuse is widespread. 90 per cent of sexually abused children were abused by someone they knew. And one in three children abused by an adult told no one else at the time.*

Research suggests that children with developmental disabilities are at an increased risk of physical and sexual abuse.

Children find it hard to speak out. By encouraging children to talk about issues earlier, providing a clear process to do this, and listening to their thoughts and feelings, parents can create the culture of openness that helps keep children safe from abuse.

Won't talking to my child about this scare them?

We believe in safe, secure childhoods – which is why the advice we're giving is practical and reassuring. We don't want to upset or scare families and we definitely don't want to make children feel they can't accept a hug or a kiss from an adult.

Feel free to use language and ideas you know your child will understand and adapt it as they get older.

*Based on NSPCC research with 11-17 year olds: Radford et al (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today.



Your child will feel confident that they can come to you whenever they're worried.

Does this mean I have to talk to my child about sex?

You don't have to talk about sex or keeping safe from sexual abuse until you feel your child is ready. But if your child asks questions, it's really valuable to take the opportunity to talk.

It shows that you are open to having conversations and will help your child feel confident that they can come to you whenever they're worried. Should you wish to talk about sex with your child, more information can be found [here](#).

What if my child says something that worries me?

If your child says something that worries you in any way, get some advice. Talk to a teacher at school or get in touch with us on [0808 800 5000](tel:08088005000). We're here 24/7 to give advice and support.

If it's nothing to worry about, you can feel assured that you've checked it out.

Remember, it's probably a huge relief for your child to be able to talk to you. Whatever you think and feel, it's about reacting with love, support, openness and reassurance. It's not something to be frightened of – we can support you and help you move forward.





Talking tips

Short, open and honest conversations are the best way to introduce the PANTS rules to your child and talk about keeping safe.

Inevitably your child will have questions, so listen carefully and attentively and be straightforward in your answers.

You know your child best of all, so adapt the conversation and talk in a way that feels right for you both.





Find easy ways to have comfortable chats, little and often.

Add simple conversations to your daily routine

A good tip is not to treat it like a lecture. It's much better to find easy ways to have comfortable chats, little and often.

Adding simple conversations about staying safe into your day or routine will help prevent your child from feeling like it's a big deal, unusual or weird.

It's important that you choose a time when your child is relaxed and able to take in information. Be aware of sensory issues and make sure you are in an environment without distractions such as noise, smells, stark lighting or visual stimuli, which could cause sensory overload.





Finding the right time

In the car

Car journeys can be a good opportunity to talk to your child, if they find this environment comfortable and free from distractions. However, for some children with autism this may not be the case.

To and from school

On your way to school, you can ask about who they would tell at school if something was upsetting them.

If your child has had classes about relationships or personal safety at school, for example, ask what they learned on the way home.

It's a good chance to measure your child's understanding and it gives you a starting point for more detailed conversations about their safety.





Add simple conversations to your daily routine.

The bedtime routine

When you're getting your child ready for bed – or helping them tie their shoelaces – you could talk about times when a trusted adult might need to touch them.

Going swimming

You can easily adapt the PANTS rules to bathing costumes, and talk about the idea of private parts being private, so that's why they are covered.

Listening to radio or watching TV

Your child may have heard a disturbing story on the news or a favourite soap might be handling a sensitive storyline.

Though we might sometimes wish our children hadn't heard something, it's best to address the point head on rather than dismiss it or pretend it hasn't happened.

Reframe the subject in words your child would find less frightening. Also reassure them that if anyone or anything worries or upsets them, they can always talk to a trusted adult.





How to talk about keeping safe

Speak openly and honestly

If you speak honestly and in a way that makes the subject feel less shocking, your child will be more confident and comfortable talking to you about difficult subjects. The more open and relaxed you are, the more your child will feel able to talk about anything that's worrying them.

In their own language

Use words and phrases your child will understand – don't be afraid to use the correct name for body parts. It may help to use visuals to show where body parts are or point to them to ensure clear understanding. For some children with autism, they may find it easier to write down or draw their worries, rather than talk about them. They may also need it made clear when and how they do this (for example, what feeling worried is and what to do or who to go to when they feel like this).

Give straight answers to tricky questions

Don't shy away from awkward questions – answer them as best you can, in a way that's right for your child. Remember that children with autism can be quite literal in their understanding so be aware of the wording you use, ensuring you use clear language.





Your child may find it easier to write down or draw their worries.



Ask questions to check your child's understanding

Conversations about right and wrong aren't easy. Even when we talk to children about not letting people touch their private parts, we have to make exceptions such as visits to the doctor.

A great way to help children understand the grey areas is to encourage them to both express their opinions and develop their own judgment. For a child with autism it may help to present this visually, for example, a two-column page split into right and wrong, with ticks and crosses next to different scenarios.

Sometimes a child with autism may give the impression they have understood something when they have not. It's important to check that they really have understood in a way appropriate to their level of understanding.

Actively listen

Use ways appropriate to your child, to show that you are listening and engaged. As a child with autism may not pick up on non-verbal cues, you may need to provide verbal cues such as repeating back what they have said or asking questions to check you have understood correctly.

Showing your child you care about what they think and how they feel means they'll be more likely to come to you if something's troubling them. You may need to provide alternatives to talking or a phrase to use, to help them know how to talk about their worries, as they may not be able to initiate this themselves. Providing structured time to talk about the day, including any worries, may also help.



Extra advice for talking PANTS

Don't force the issue

If your child isn't interested in talking, don't force the issue. The last thing you want is for your child to feel it's a big deal, so wait for another opportunity at a different time. For a child with autism, there may not feel like a time when your child is interested in talking about this type of issue.

It may help to use a special interest of theirs to gain their attention and then introduce the subject through that. For example, using a favourite TV or story character.

Use books and stories

Reading a story can help you talk about difficult subjects in a way that is suitable for your child's age and can help teach them to stay safe in terms they understand. You may need to clarify exactly what safe means. You may also find it helpful to use social stories, which can explain a certain situation, and what to do and why.

Ask your child to share with you who they can trust

Get your child to think about all the people in their life they can trust. This could be done through a written list, photos or pictures. You may need to explain what trust means; a social story may help with this.

It shows them that, even if there's any reason they can't tell you something, they should never have to keep a worry to themselves.





Assure your child that they can come to you with any questions or concerns.

Pass the message to others

Let any other adults who regularly care for your child know that you've spoken about the PANTS rules.

Your child may ask them follow up questions, so it will help the other adults to reinforce the same messages.

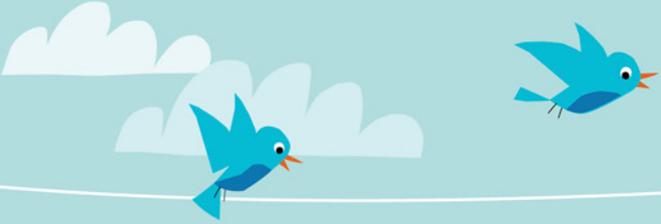
Keep the conversation going as they grow

Remember to keep the lines of communication open with your child and assure them that they can come to you with any question or concern.

As they grow up, they will have more questions and more capacity to understand these issues.

Having that openness and knowing a clear process to communicate their concerns means your child will feel comfortable talking and sharing worries with the family as they get older.





Talk to us

You can find lots of further information and support on talking PANTS, as well as talking and listening techniques, at nspcc.org.uk/pants

If you ever need to talk, contact us. We're here 24/7. Call **0808 800 5000** or send one of our counsellors a message at nspcc.org.uk/help

For confidential advice and support on autism you can also contact The National Autistic Society helpline on **0808 800 4104**. Lines are open Monday to Friday between 10am-4pm. To find out more visit autism.org.uk/helpline

Talking PANTS

nspcc.org.uk/pants

NSPCC

0808 800 5000

nspcc.org.uk/help

Autism Helpline

0808 800 4104

autism.org.uk/helpline

ALWAYS HERE

If a child you know needs to talk, they can always call Childline for free, confidential help.



childline



ONLINE, ON THE PHONE, ANYTIME
childline.org.uk | 0800 1111





Do you know how to talk PANTS?

It's a simple way to have conversations with your child about staying safe.

We've created this guide for parents of children with autism. It will help you talk to your child about their body, and what to do if they're made to feel uncomfortable.

nspcc.org.uk/pants



This version was adapted from our original parents' guide, with help from The National Autistic Society.

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England and Wales 216401. Scotland SC037717.
Illustration by Jamie Nash. J20161202.



The National
Autistic Society